

News from Ed Markey

United States Congress

Massachusetts Seventh District

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NRC LETTER CONFIRMS THAT SEABROOK NUCLEAR POWER PLANT BACKUP POWER SOURCES WERE BOTH "INOPERABLE" FOR 7.5 DAYS

WASHINGTON, DC— Congressman Edward J. Markey (D-MA) today released a letter from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) regarding a long-term problem with the backup power at Seabrook nuclear power plant in New Hampshire. The issue is especially important in light of the need for backup power to prevent meltdown in the event of external power outages due to "Y2K" bug problems at the end of the year. The letter from Shirley Ann Jackson, Chairman of the NRC, to Rep. Markey dated June 18, 1999, responds to a April 5, 1999 letter Rep. Markey sent to Dr. Jackson following the discovery that one of the two emergency diesel generators at Seabrook was inoperable due to faulty relays and likely had been for many months. Rep. Markey said, "Emergency diesel generators are the last bulwark between Y2K problems and nuclear meltdown. As the fixed deadline for Y2K action grows ever nearer, it is critical that the generators not fail us."

The NRC response reveals that the second backup power source at Seabrook also was inoperable for roughly 7.5 days since the relays were last tested in 1997. During that time, had there been an external power outage, operator action to connect the plant to the diesel generator would have been necessary to prevent a plant meltdown.

The NRC letter emphasizes that backup power was still available as the plant operators could have manually connected various circuits to the generator and could have manually started the Containment Building Spray pump. However, Rep. Markey said, "Once again the NRC seems to be relying on human action to compensate for mechanical failure. But human error during emergencies has been responsible for every major nuclear accident from Three Mile Island to Chernobyl."

Rep. Markey's letter had pointed to a statement from Seabrook spokesman David Barr reported by the Associated Press, "Barr said Seabrook tests its two back-up diesel generators, each the size of a school bus, about once a month. He said they have never failed." The NRC letter explains that although the *generators* are tested monthly, some associated systems, including the relays, are only tested during refueling outages (which occur roughly every 18 months at Seabrook). The NRC letter also reveals that the relays failed due to "a combination of an improper calibration setting and corrosion products," i.e. to human error and plant aging. Since many plants are now going longer between refueling outages, testing of some components is becoming less frequent just as plant aging is causing more failures.

Regarding Y2K preparations, the NRC letter states that "NRC inspectors will confirm that licensee Y2K programs address emergency power sources, arrangements for obtaining critical commodities (e.g., EDG fuel oil), and other considerations." According to the letter, the NRC "expects" that licensees will schedule maintenance of backup power sources around the Y2K transition date.

Rep. Markey concluded, "It is encouraging that the NRC recognizes the importance of backup power in preventing problems due to the Y2K bug. But I am worried that both the operators and the NRC are still overconfident in the reliability of the generators despite the long record of generator failures. Having no emergency backup for a nuclear power plant is like having no health insurance, except that in a nuclear accident not just a family is at risk but rather the population of an entire region."

Copies of the correspondence are available on request.

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